Concentration camp is a place where people are imprisoned, and in some cases killed, without legal proceedings. Many countries have imprisoned people in concentration camps because of their political views, religious convictions, ethnic background, or social attitudes. The best-known camps were those operated by the Nazis during the Holocaust, a campaign of systematic murder waged against Jews and others during World War II (1939-1945). The Nazis imprisoned and killed millions of people in such camps, first in Germany and later in German-occupied Europe.

Nazi concentration camps were created soon after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933. The Nazis established the first permanent camp in Dachau, Germany, near Munich, in March 1933. Nazi camps held socialists, Communists, and other political prisoners; Jews; homosexuals; priests and ministers; and many others. After World War II started in September 1939, the Nazis increasingly used camp inmates for slave labour.

In a Nazi concentration camp, prisoners often were forced to work long hours under cruel conditions. The women shown here are inmates of Ravensbrück, a Nazi camp that existed in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s in north-eastern Germany.

(c) Lydia Chagoll, Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

In 1941, the Nazis began to build Vernichtungslager (death camps). These camps were established for the purpose of killing Jews with poison gas and other methods. By the end of 1942, the Nazis had created six death camps, all in German-occupied Poland—Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka.

The most notorious of these death camps was the camp at Auschwitz. During World War II, the Nazis murdered about 11/4 million people there. The victims included Jews, Poles, Roma (sometimes called Gypsies), and Soviet prisoners of war.

Auschwitz was not just a death camp. It also included a slave labour complex. After prisoners arrived at Auschwitz, the Nazis took their clothes and other possessions. The camp officials sent the old and the very young, the weak, women with children, and people with disabilities directly to gas chambers. Able-bodied prisoners worked in the slave labour complex. When they became weak or ill, the guards killed them or forced them to work until they died. After the prisoners were dead, the Nazis removed any gold teeth from the corpses and burned the bodies.

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